Debate

The Case for a Ukrainian Nuclear Deterrent

John J. Mearsheimer

THE LOGIC OF PROLIFERATION

MOST WESTERN OBSERVERS want Ukraine to rid itself of nuclear weapons as quickly as possible. In this view, articulated recently by President Bill Clinton, Europe would be more stable if Russia were to become "the only nuclear-armed successor state to the Soviet Union." The United States and its European allies have been pressing Ukraine to transfer all of the nuclear weapons on its territory to the Russians, who naturally think this is an excellent idea.

President Clinton is wrong. The conventional wisdom about Ukraine's nuclear weapons is wrong. In fact, as soon as it declared independence, Ukraine should have been quietly encouraged to fashion its own nuclear deterrent. Even now, pressing Ukraine to become a nonnuclear state is a mistake.

A nuclear Ukraine makes sense for two reasons. First, it is imperative to maintain peace between Russia and Ukraine. That means ensuring that the Russians, who have a history of bad relations with Ukraine, do not move to reconquer it. Ukraine cannot defend itself against a nuclear-armed Russia with conventional weapons, and no

JOHN J. MEARSHEIMER is Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago.

This content downloaded from 128.135.12.127 on Mon, 3 Mar 2014 16:08:05 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

state, including the United States, is going to extend to it a meaningful security guarantee. Ukrainian nuclear weapons are the only reliable deterrent to Russian aggression. If the U.S. aim is to enhance stability in Europe, the case against a nuclear-armed Ukraine is unpersuasive.

Second, it is unlikely that Ukraine will transfer its remaining nuclear weapons to Russia, the state it fears most. The United States and its European allies can complain bitterly about this decision, but they are not in a position to force Ukraine to go nonnuclear. Moreover, pursuing a confrontation with Ukraine over the nuclear issue raises the risks of war by making the Russians more daring, the Ukrainians more fearful, and the Americans less able to defuse a crisis between them.

The case presented here for a Ukrainian nuclear deterrent is not a brief for unrestricted nuclear proliferation in Europe or anywhere else in the world. Nuclear proliferation does not axiomatically promote peace and can in some cases even cause war. For example, smaller European powers might lack the resources needed to make their nuclear force survivable, and vulnerable nuclear forces would invite a first strike in a crisis. Moreover, widespread proliferation would increase the number of fingers on the nuclear trigger, which in turn would increase the likelihood that nuclear weapons could be fired due to accident, unauthorized use, terrorist seizure or irrational decision-making.

Nevertheless, nuclear proliferation sometimes promotes peace. Overall, the best formula for maintaining stability in post-Cold War Europe is for all the great powers—including Germany and Ukraine—to have secure nuclear deterrents and for all the minor powers to be nonnuclear.

WHO CONTROLS THE WEAPONS?

THE BREAKUP OF the Soviet Union left Ukraine with almost 4,000 nuclear weapons on its territory. Ukrainian leaders emphasized before and immediately after Ukraine declared its independence on December 1, 1991, that Ukraine would transfer all of its nuclear

This content downloaded from 128.135.12.127 on Mon, 3 Mar 2014 16:08:05 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

weapons to Russia by the end of 1994, sign the Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) and live the life of a nonnuclear state.

True to its word, Ukraine moved all of its tactical nuclear weapons to Russia between January and May 1992. However, none of Ukraine's 1,656 strategic nuclear weapons have been transferred to Russia. That force, which is aimed at the United States but could be programmed to strike Russia, includes 130 SS-19s (6 warheads each), 46 SS-24s (10 warheads each), and 30 Bear-H and Blackjack bombers (together carrying 416 bombs), making a total of 1,656 nuclear weapons.

Who actually controls these nuclear weapons is a complicated and somewhat murky matter. Russia and Ukraine each claim administrative responsibility over the weapons. Ukraine apparently has administrative jurisdiction, which means it is responsible for protecting and maintaining the weapons. Russian experts, however, help service them. Ukraine supposedly has neither the authority nor the capability to launch the nuclear weapons it houses. The Commonwealth of Independent States makes those decisions, although Ukraine has the authority but not the capability to veto a launch decision.

There is evidence to suggest, however, that Ukraine might have ultimate control over the bombers. Also, Ukrainian President Leonid Kravchuk has hinted that his country has the ability to fire its SS-24s, which were built in Ukraine. Finally, Kiev is developing a command and control system of its own that could be used to launch the weapons without Moscow's permission. If Ukraine were to abandon its commitment to denuclearize and instead keep the strategic nuclear arsenal located on its soil—as seems increasingly likely—it would have the third-largest nuclear force in the world, behind the formidable American and Russian forces.

WHY RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN PEACE IS IMPORTANT

A WAR BETWEEN Russia and Ukraine would be a disaster. Great power wars are very costly and dangerous, causing massive loss of life and worldwide turmoil, and possibly spreading to involve other countries. The likely result of that war—Russia's reconquest of

This content downloaded from 128.135.12.127 on Mon, 3 Mar 2014 16:08:05 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

Ukraine—would injure prospects for peace throughout Europe. It would increase the danger of a Russian-German collision, and sharply intensify the security competition across the continent.

A conventional war between Russia and Ukraine would entail vast military casualties and the possible murder of many thousands of civilians. Russians and Ukrainians have a history of mutual enmity; this hostility, combined with the intermixing of their populations, raises the possibility that war between them could entail Bosnian-style ethnic cleansing and mass murder. This war could produce millions of refugees clamoring at the borders of Western Europe.

In addition, there are 14 operational nuclear reactors in Ukraine that might produce new Chernobyls if left unattended or attacked during a conventional war. The consequences of such a war would dwarf the death and suffering in the Balkans, where more than 50,000 people have died since the summer of 1991. Needless to say, if nuclear weapons were used the costs would be immeasurable.

There is also the threat of escalation beyond the borders of Russia and Ukraine. For example, the Russians might decide to reconquer other parts of the former Soviet Union in the midst of a war, or might try to take back some of Eastern Europe. Poland and Belarus might join forces with Russia against Ukraine or gang up with Ukraine to prevent a Russian resurgence. The Germans, Americans or Chinese could get pulled in by their fear of a Russian victory. (Doubters should remember that the United States had no intention of fighting in Europe when war broke out in 1914 and again in 1939.) Finally, nuclear weapons might be used accidentally or purposefully against a third state.

Ukrainian nuclear weapons are the only reliable deterrent to Russian aggression.

The security environment in Europe would certainly become heated and competitive in the wake of a Russian war with Ukraine. Other great powers would move quickly and sharply to contain further Russian expansion. The Russians would then think seriously—for security reasons—about controlling their many smaller neighbors. Other great powers would move to check them.

This content downloaded from 128.135.12.127 on Mon, 3 Mar 2014 16:08:05 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

One might expect the burden of deterring a resurgent Russia to fall to an American-dominated NATO, in effect, bringing back the Cold War order that kept Europe at peace for 45 years. That outcome is not likely, however, for a number of reasons. The United States is reducing force levels in Europe significantly, which will cause it to lose much of its leverage on the continent. Even if Russia behaves aggressively, U.S. troops are not likely to return to Europe in large numbers, mainly because the Germans are capable of bearing most of the burden of checking the Russians. The Germans are well-located geographically to counter Russian expansion, and they are strong enough to do so. Germany not only has a powerful economy, but its population has just increased by almost 20 million. Russia, even with the conquest of Ukraine, would probably be markedly less powerful than the former Soviet Union.

A multipolar Europe with a German-Russian security competition at its core might be inevitable, regardless of Ukraine's fate. Germany and Russia will probably be the two most powerful states in post-Cold War Europe. Nevertheless, an independent Ukraine dampens that competition because it is a formidable barrier between Russia and Germany. Remove that key buffer, however, and the borders of the two most powerful states on the continent would be much closer to each other, with the territory in between occupied by weak states. An intense political rivalry focused on this new buffer zone would probably result.

WHY RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN CONFLICT IS LIKELY

DESPITE SOME TESTY moments, relations between Russia and Ukraine have generally been stable since the Soviet breakup. There are, however, good reasons to fear that these relations might deteriorate. First, the situation between Ukraine and Russia is ripe for the outbreak of security competition between them. Great powers that share a long and unprotected common border, like that between Russia and Ukraine, often lapse into competition driven by security fears. Russia and Ukraine might overcome this dynamic and learn to live together in harmony, but it would be unusual if they do.

This content downloaded from 128.135.12.127 on Mon, 3 Mar 2014 16:08:05 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

Second, there is the danger of hypernationalism, the belief that other nations or nation states are both inferior and threatening and must therefore be dealt with harshly. Expressions of Russian and Ukrainian nationalism have been largely benign since the Soviet collapse, and there have been few manifestations of communal hatred on either side. Nevertheless, the Russians and the Ukrainians neither like nor trust each other. The grim history that has passed between these two peoples provides explosive material that could ignite conflict between them.

Russia has dominated an unwilling and angry Ukraine for more than two centuries, and has attempted to crush Ukraine's sense of self-identity. Recent history witnessed the greatest horrors in this relationship: Stalin's government murdered an astounding 12 million Ukrainians during the 1930s. Though Stalin was a Georgian, and the Soviet Union was not a formally "Russian" government, Russia had predominant power within the Soviet Union, and much of the killing was done by Russians. Therefore, the Ukrainians are bound to lay heavy blame on the Russians for their vast suffering under Bolshevism. Against this explosive psychological backdrop, small disputes could trigger an outbreak of hypernationalism on either side.

Third, several such disputes are already on the horizon: ownership of the Black Sea Fleet, control of the Crimea, ownership of Ukraine's nuclear arsenal, and a host of economic issues stemming from the breakup of the Soviet Union. Furthermore, many Russians would change the present border with Ukraine, and some even reject the idea of an independent Ukraine. Senior Russian officials, for example, have recently been describing Ukraine's independence as a "transitional" phenomenon and have been warning other European governments not to open embassies in Kiev because they would soon be downgraded to consular sections subordinate to their embassies in Moscow.[1]

Fourth, there is the problem of mixed populations. Roughly 11.5 million Russians live in Ukraine (comprising 22 percent of Ukraine's

[1]Chrystia Freeland, "Russia 'Trying' To Isolate Ukraine," *The Financial Times*, March 17, 1993, p. 2.

This content downloaded from 128.135.12.127 on Mon, 3 Mar 2014 16:08:05 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

population) and approximately 4.5 million Ukrainians live in Russia. Abuse of either minority by the local majority could be a flash point for crisis.

WHY THE ALTERNATIVES WILL NOT WORK

To deter Russian aggression in a future crisis, Ukraine might consider developing a conventional deterrent, or asking the West to extend it a security guarantee. These alternatives, however, are not feasible.

A Ukrainian conventional deterrent is not a viable option because Ukraine cannot build an army powerful enough to stop a Russian attack. Ukraine's army might put up dogged resistance, but it would eventually be defeated. Russia is simply too powerful. The best indicators of latent military power—population, gross national product, industrial output—show Russia to be about three times more powerful than Ukraine. Even if Ukraine had a stalwart conventional deterrent, a nuclear-free Ukraine would still be vulnerable to Russian nuclear blackmail.

Finally, Ukraine would have to ruthlessly extract resources from its society if it tried to compete with its bigger neighbor at the conventional level. Conventional military power is significantly more expensive than nuclear military power and requires a larger military; hence it requires far more popular mobilization. Reliance on conventional forces would therefore tempt Ukrainian leaders to portray the Russian threat in the worst possible light and fan the flames of nationalism, which could heighten friction between Ukrainians and the large Russian population living in Ukraine. This development would upset the Russians and push them to consider military intervention to protect their fellow Russians.

A security guarantee from the West is theoretically possible but not a practical strategy for maintaining Ukrainian sovereignty. Extending deterrence to Germany during the Cold War was a demanding and expensive job; extending deterrence further east to Ukraine would be even more difficult. Neither America nor its European allies are eager to take on an expensive new commitment;

This content downloaded from 128.135.12.127 on Mon, 3 Mar 2014 16:08:05 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

on the contrary, NATO's power is shrinking rapidly. Political will aside, extending NATO's security umbrella into the heart of the old Soviet Union is not wise. It is sure to enrage the Russians and cause them to act belligerently.

NUCLEAR WEAPONS ARE THE ANSWER

VILIFYING NUCLEAR WEAPONS is a fashionable sport in the West. Many believe they are a major source of tension between states and that their deterrent value is quite limited. Given these beliefs and the horrible consequences of nuclear war, it is hardly surprising that many people want to rid the world of these weapons.

This view of nuclear weapons is simplistic and flies in the face of the inherent logic of nuclear deterrence, as well as the history of the Cold War. In fact, nuclear weapons often diminish international violence, and Ukrainian nuclear weapons would be an effective deterrent against a Russian conventional attack or nuclear blackmail.

In the pre-nuclear world of industrialized great powers, there were two world wars between 1900 and 1945 in which some 50 million Europeans died. In the nuclear age, the story is very different. Only some 15,000 Europeans were killed in minor wars between 1945 and 1990, and there was a stable peace between the superpowers that became increasingly robust over time. A principal cause of this "long peace" was nuclear weapons.

Nuclear weapons are a powerful force for peace because they are weapons of mass destruction. They create the possibility that in a war both sides will cease to exist as functioning societies. This catastrophic threat will foreclose any Russian thoughts of aggression against Ukraine, since a defeated Ukraine could well use its nuclear weapons against Russia before going under. Defeat for Ukraine at the hands of the Russians would mean loss of sovereignty, and history makes clear that states will pay very high costs to maintain it. Hence an aggressive Russia could not dismiss the Ukrainian nuclear threat. Moreover, there is always the possibility that nuclear weapons might be used inadvertently or accidentally in the course of a conventional war, which provides further incentives for caution.

This content downloaded from 128.135.12.127 on Mon, 3 Mar 2014 16:08:05 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

There is a second reason to favor a Ukrainian nuclear deterrent: it is inevitable. Ukraine is likely to keep its nuclear weapons, regardless of what other states say and do. American opposition would raise the risk of war between Russia and Ukraine.

Ukraine has suffered greatly at the hands of outside occupiers. After Stalin's murder of 12 million in the 1930s, the Germans killed another 7 million Ukrainians during World War II. This dark history, plus a Russian threat next door and the absence of outsiders willing to deter that threat, makes it unlikely that Ukraine would give up its nuclear weapons. Reflecting this reality, pronuclear sentiment is already growing rapidly in Ukraine. America and its allies may complain about Ukraine's new posture, but they would not have to live with the consequences of a Russian attack if deterrence fails.

Once the Russians learn that Ukraine is keeping its nuclear arsenal, they will doubtless consider launching a preventive war to eliminate it before it becomes fully operational. But this is an unattractive military option. It would be a difficult task with conventional means, since Ukraine inherited substantial conventional forces from the Soviet military, which would enable it to put up formidable resistance. The Russians might launch a nuclear strike against the Ukrainian arsenal. The probability of Ukrainian nuclear retaliation would be small, but the Russians could never be sure that Ukraine would not launch some nuclear weapons back at them, causing cataclysmic damage, even if the retaliation was ragged. Also, radioactive fallout from an attack on Ukraine would contaminate Russia as well.

There were two world wars between 1900 and 1945 in which some 50 million Europeans died; only 15,000 were killed in minor wars between 1945 and 1990.

Thus military calculations alone should suffice to deter the Russians from launching a preventive war. Nevertheless, it is important that every element in the deterrent equation work to prevent war from breaking out. Strong American and European resistance to Ukraine's decision to be a nuclear state is likely to isolate Ukraine diplomatically and weaken deterrence.

This content downloaded from 128.135.12.127 on Mon, 3 Mar 2014 16:08:05 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

An American-Ukrainian confrontation over Ukrainian nuclear weapons could encourage the Russians to believe that they could destroy those weapons by force without doing much long-term damage to Russian relations with the West. Russians who favored such an attack could point to recent history to bolster their argument: the United States tolerated the Israeli raid against the Iraqi nuclear facilities in 1981, and then went to war itself against Iraq in 1991 over this very issue. These cases may suggest to the Russians that the United States would not strongly oppose Russia if it adopts the same course of action against Ukraine.

Furthermore, an isolated and fearful Ukraine is likely to be especially suspicious of and hostile to the Russians in a crisis. This can only work to fuel Russian fears and thus make war more likely. Finally, American efforts to compel Ukraine to yield its nuclear weapons would leave Ukraine resentful and mistrustful of the United States. As a result, America would be less able to defuse a Russian-Ukrainian crisis, since Ukraine would no longer see the United States as an honest broker.

THE CASE AGAINST NUCLEAR DETERRENCE

FOUR PRINCIPAL ARGUMENTS might be raised against Ukraine keeping its nuclear arsenal.

First, a Ukrainian nuclear deterrent will cause proliferation, especially in Europe, and undermine both the NPT and the first and second Strategic Arms Reduction (START) agreements.

Second, Ukraine has neither the technical, intellectual, nor political wherewithal to be trusted with nuclear weapons.

Third, Russia will react aggressively toward Ukraine if Ukraine keeps its nuclear arsenal, thus increasing the likelihood of war.

And fourth, there is a small but reasonable chance that nuclear war might occur. That possibility is so frightening that it makes sense to forsake a Ukrainian nuclear deterrent, even though it means a greater likelihood of conventional war between Russia and Ukraine.

These arguments cannot be summarily dismissed. They sound intuitively plausible, and there is no fatal flaw common to all of them.

This content downloaded from 128.135.12.127 on Mon, 3 Mar 2014 16:08:05 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

Instead, the logic underpinning each one must be unpacked and matched against the appropriate counterargument to demonstrate why the case against a nuclear Ukraine is unpersuasive.

INCREASED PROLIFERATION

A UKRAINIAN NUCLEAR deterrent might be thought to cause proliferation in four ways. First, it could be argued that other states might imitate Ukraine, because nuclear weapons confer status. It is true that status does matter in the international system and that nuclear weapons enhance a state's status somewhat. Status concerns, however, are not the main cause of proliferation. Insecurity is the driving force behind national security policy, and highly insecure states are the most likely to acquire nuclear weapons.

Second, there is a concern that Ukraine would be the first state to go nuclear in the post-Cold War world, thus legitimizing nuclear arsenals as a military strategy for other nonnuclear states. This argument about precedent would have been moot if the United States had not labeled Ukraine a new nuclear state, and instead accepted that it, like Russia, was a legitimate heir to the Soviet arsenal. More important, insecure nonnuclear states do not need the Ukrainian case to enlighten them about the benefits of nuclear deterrence or to justify a decision to go nuclear. The simple desire to survive in this precarious world will suffice.

Third, people fear that a nuclear-armed Ukraine would make other states in Europe, especially Poland and Germany, feel insecure and push them to acquire nuclear weapons. During the Cold War, proliferation was driven in good part by this logic. For example, the Soviets surely felt threatened by America's nuclear deterrent, while the Chinese were undoubtedly motivated by both the American and Soviet nuclear arsenals. It is not clear, however, that a Ukrainian nuclear deterrent would push Poland and Germany to go nuclear. In fact, Ukrainian nuclear weapons might dampen the incentives for proliferation in Europe.

A nuclear-armed Ukraine is not likely to pursue expansionist policies to its west. While there is no love lost between Poland and

This content downloaded from 128.135.12.127 on Mon, 3 Mar 2014 16:08:05 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

Ukraine, neither Germany nor Russia would look kindly on Ukrainian pressure against Poland. Ukraine's military is likely to be pointed overwhelmingly in one direction: eastward at the Russians. The event most likely to scare the Poles and Germans enough to acquire nuclear weapons would be Russian reconquest of Ukraine. That possibility is much less likely if Russia is facing a nuclear-armed Ukraine. Insecurity above all else will drive the Poles and Germans down the nuclear road, and, on balance, they are likely to feel safer with the present map of Europe than one with a greater Russia.

Fourth, arms controllers argue that the NPT would be crippled if Ukraine keeps its nuclear arsenal, and the START agreements would have to be abandoned. They may be right, but their argument is irrelevant. The United States should continue to support the NPT, but it must recognize that the agreement will come under increasing stress in the post-Cold War world. The international system's new architecture creates powerful incentives to proliferate. A nuclear Ukraine will corrode the legitimacy of the NPT, but this damage can be limited if the United States reverses its 1991 policy of labeling Ukraine a potential proliferator and instead redefines Ukraine as a nuclear inheritor, and hence a special case. Regardless, preventing war between Russia and Ukraine is more impotant than preserving the NPT. The START treaties are vestiges of the Cold War order. If a Ukrainian nuclear deterrent threatens them, they should be renegotiated to accommodate a nuclear Ukraine. After all, America's ultimate goal is to create peace and stability in Europe, not ratify arms control agreements for their own sake, especially those created for another time.

Preventing war between Russia and Ukraine is more important than preserving the Nonproliferation Treaty.

UKRAINE'S INCOMPETENCE

THE FIRST STRAND of the "incompetence" argument is that Ukraine does not have the wherewithal to develop and maintain a secure retaliatory force. Thus, the Russians would be tempted to launch a disarming first strike in a crisis against Ukraine.

This content downloaded from 128.135.12.127 on Mon, 3 Mar 2014 16:08:05 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

But while the precise details of the future nuclear balance between Russia and Ukraine cannot now be foreseen, it seems unlikely that the Russians can develop a disarming first-strike capability against Ukraine. Decapitating Ukraine's command and control system would be extremely difficult, and could be made even more so if Ukraine pre-delegated control away from the center. A direct attack against Ukraine's intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and bombers would be no more promising.

Consider a Russian first strike against the existing Ukrainian nuclear arsenal predicated on worst-case assumptions for Ukraine. Assume the Russians achieve complete surprise and destroy all of Ukraine's bombers and 90 percent of its 176 ICBMs.[2] Ukraine would be left with 18 ICBMs—13 SS-19s and 5 SS-24s. These missiles contain 128 nuclear warheads, which should be more than enough to wreak vast destruction on Russia. Even if only 10 percent or 13 of those warheads reached Russian cities, they would leave Russia devastated. More realistic assumptions about the effectiveness of a Russian attack would leave Ukraine even more warheads with which to strike Russia. In addition, Ukraine can enhance the survivability of its nuclear deterrent over time.

The second strand of the incompetence argument is that even if Ukraine builds a survivable retaliatory force, it cannot be trusted to be a responsible nuclear weapons custodian. Its elites are not likely to grasp the essentials of national security policy, much less the nuances of nuclear deterrence theory, and its political system is unstable. It is true that Ukraine's national security elite will have to adjust rapidly to its country's new position as a sovereign state in the international system. However, there is no reason to think that the elite will be less competent than its Russian counterpart. After all, Ukrainians were

[2] The most comprehensive public study of Cold War nuclear-exchange scenarios concludes that an all-out Soviet surprise attack—under worst-case assumptions for the United States—could have destroyed 79 percent of America's ICBMs. See Michael Salaman, Kevin J. Sullivan and Stephen Van Evera, "Analysis or Propaganda? Measuring American Strategic Nuclear Capability, 1969–88," in *Nuclear Arguments: Understanding The Strategic Nuclear Arms and Arms Control Debates*, Lynn Eden and Steven E. Miller, eds., Ithaca (NY): Cornell University Press, 1989, p. 216. Extrapolating from that analysis, my 90 percent figure seems conservative.

This content downloaded from 128.135.12.127 on Mon, 3 Mar 2014 16:08:05 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

well represented in the Soviet national security apparatus. They are not babes in the woods when it comes to nuclear issues, and they can learn quickly.

As a newly independent state facing significant internal problems, it is difficult to predict how stable Ukraine's political system will be over time. Nevertheless, it is stable now, and there is no good reason to think it will be chronically unstable. Besides, by this logic, Russia would be the more dangerous state and it would be even more dangerous to its neighbor if left undeterred. Even if Ukraine were destabilized, the likelihood of nuclear use should not increase substantially. Obviously it is best not to have internal upheaval in nuclear states. But the costs of nuclear war are so great, and so obvious, that all sides in a domestic dispute would have powerful incentives to keep the nuclear arsenal safely stowed away. There have been four cases of significant domestic unrest involving nuclear powers: the French "generals' revolt" (1961), the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966–69), the unseating of Pakistan's Benazir Bhutto (1990) and the collapse of the Soviet Union (1991). Nuclear weapons were not part of the internal political struggle in any of these cases.

THE ANGRY RUSSIAN REACTION

MANY EXPERTS EXPLAIN that Russia and Ukraine are on reasonably good terms at the moment, and there is no serious prospect of war between them. A Ukrainian decision to keep its nuclear weapons might anger and unnerve the Russians, who want Ukraine denuclearized. The hand of Russian hardliners would be strengthened, which would cause Russia to pursue a more aggressive foreign policy against Ukraine, thus increasing the chances of preventive war. In this view, nuclear weapons would cause the problem they are designed to prevent.

My argument for a Ukrainian nuclear deterrent assumes that Russian-Ukrainian relations are likely to deteriorate in the future. If trouble were not in the offing, Ukraine would not need a nuclear arsenal. The safest strategy is to make Ukraine a responsible nuclear

This content downloaded from 128.135.12.127 on Mon, 3 Mar 2014 16:08:05 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

power before serious trouble starts between them, and not have to attempt this in the middle of a Russian-Ukrainian crisis.

There will certainly be an outcry in Russia if Ukraine retains its nuclear weapons. Russian hawks will probably benefit from the commotion, with potentially serious effects. That is not good news, but the Russians are not likely to initiate a war over the issue. To start, Ukraine's nuclear arsenal would not be especially threatening to Russia, as it would be essentially a deterrent force with hardly any offensive utility. The West should work to convince the Russians of this point, and also go to considerable lengths to assure the Russians that Ukraine has no close links with NATO, but is only seeking to defend itself.

The likely outcome of a preventive war further mitigates against a Russian attack. If Ukraine is a virtual nuclear state, a Russian strike would be tantamount to suicide. A Russian attack against Ukraine before its nuclear weapons were fully operational would be a terribly risky option. Ukraine has powerful conventional forces, and whether the Russians strike with conventional or nuclear forces, they could never be sure Ukraine will not have at least a few nuclear weapons to detonate on Russian cities. As long as Ukraine has more than a thousand nuclear warheads on its soil, Russia is likely to be deterred from starting a war.

If nuclear deterrence works, and there is ample reason to believe it will, the Russians will protest loudly at first, and increase their military spending somewhat. With time, however, they are likely to accommodate themselves to Ukraine's nuclear weapons and the stability they bring to the region. Relations will probably settle down in the long run, as they did between the superpowers during the Cold War.

WHAT IF DETERRENCE FAILS?

MANY ACCEPT THAT nuclear weapons may be an excellent deterrent, but there is always the possibility that deterrence will fail and nuclear weapons will be used. The consequences of a nuclear war for Europe would be catastrophic. It is unlikely that the United States

This content downloaded from 128.135.12.127 on Mon, 3 Mar 2014 16:08:05 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

would be struck in the event of a Russian-Ukrainian nuclear exchange. Nevertheless, both remnant states have nuclear weapons that can reach the United States. Thus, some ask, would it not make sense to do away with Ukraine's nuclear weapons even if it makes conventional war between Russia and Ukraine more likely? At least the United States would reduce the risk of getting hit with a nuclear weapon in such a conflict to almost zero.

It is true that nuclear weapons, very attractive as a deterrent, begin to look awfully unattractive when the focus shifts to war fighting. Proponents of nuclear deterrence are betting that precisely because a nuclear war would be so destructive for both sides, statesmen will shrink from nuclear weapons. This is a Faustian bargain, attractive only because the alternative—a reasonable chance of destructive great power conventional war—seems worse. It is the same bargain America made during the Cold War.

The United States should solve the "innocent bystander problem," even though it has a low probability of materializing. Eliminating Ukrainian nuclear weapons does make it less likely that a nuclear weapon would land on the United States in the event of a Russian-Ukrainian war. However, the problem would not go away and might even become more acute, because Europe would be more unstable after Russia reconquered Ukraine, and the principal antagonists on the continent would surely have nuclear weapons that might land in America. The best way to avoid the innocent bystander problem is to create a stable order in Europe. That goal is best accomplished by maintaining an independent Ukraine, a goal, in turn, best achieved by a Ukrainian nuclear deterrent.

IT IS STILL NOT TOO LATE

THE UNITED STATES should have begun working immediately after the Soviet Union collapsed to quickly and smoothly make Ukraine a nuclear power. In fact Washington rejected this approach and adopted the opposite policy, which remains firmly in place. Nevertheless, it is wrongheaded, and despite the sunk costs and the

This content downloaded from 128.135.12.127 on Mon, 3 Mar 2014 16:08:05 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

difficulty of reversing field in the policy world, the Clinton administration should make a gradual but unmistakable about-face.

From the start American policy should have had three main components. First, Ukraine should have been discreetly encouraged to keep its nuclear weapons, while American policymakers worked to convince Russia that Ukraine's nuclear arsenal would be defensive and would not seriously threaten Russia. That task would not have been too difficult in late 1991, when relations between Russia and Ukraine were good, and when almost every aspect of national security in the former Soviet Union was in a state of flux, and thinking about nuclear succession had not gelled.

Second, the charge that Ukraine was a potential proliferator should have been countered by arguing that Ukraine was an integral part of a nuclear superpower, and merely inherited its share of the spoils, just like the Russians. Third, Ukraine should have been pushed to develop both doctrines and technology that would reduce the risks of preemptive and accidental war. The United States should not have offered Ukraine an interim security guarantee, and more generally should have gone to great lengths not to appear to be joining forces with Ukraine against Russia.

At this point, the United States cannot fully undo the effects of these omissions. However, it still has room to recover some lost ground. Specifically, it should tone down its warnings of the dangers of a nuclear Ukraine and move toward an agnostic public posture on the issue. It is probably best if Ukraine develops a full-fledged nuclear capability gradually and quietly. During that process, the United States should strive to stay on good terms with both sides, so it can help defuse disputes that arise between them. The United States should recognize that Ukraine is going to be a nuclear power, irrespective of what the West does. It is in America's interest to help make that happen smoothly.

This content downloaded from 128.135.12.127 on Mon, 3 Mar 2014 16:08:05 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions